

# The Struggle for Global Society in a World System<sup>1</sup>

## *A Response to Wallerstein's "After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?"*

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As Wallerstein has shown, the contemporary global economy is in crisis, and this creates opportunities for change. Moreover, the rise of a broad-based and globally networked popular movement against neoliberal globalization both reflects and contributes to the system's crisis and to the possibilities for transformation. I agree that we now see a unique opportunity for shaping a very different global order, and in this essay I explore the specific ways that sociologists might contribute to this effort. If, as Michael Burawoy argues, sociologists have a responsibility to help "represent humanity's interest in containing the unbridled tyranny of market and state," we need a theory that integrates our understandings of global structures with concrete ideas to guide our actions.

Rather than focusing our attention on the structures and vulnerabilities of global capitalism, we might instead ask questions of how, given the material conditions society faces, might we help *empower* global civil society as an agent for change in the world system (see Waterman and Timms 2004, who encourage just such a shift in the international labor movement). The key objective, I think, is to politicize the global economy. This requires a strengthening of international institutions such as the UN to enhance their deliberative and enforcement capacities relative to global financial institutions and the capitalist forces that shape those. While a stronger global polity would help empower and nurture civil society, it will not come about without concerted efforts by a solidly committed and globally networked civil society. This requires efforts to enhance global solidarity based on notions of a common humanity while fostering tolerance and pluralism. The "spirit of Porto Alegre" provides a good foundation here, and sociologists might think about how we can and should relate to social movements in order to help bring about a more just and democratic world system.

### *Sociology for Civil Society*

"Washing one's hands of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless is to side with the powerful, not to be neutral." --Paolo Friere *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

A vibrant civil society in today's information-rich world requires creative and forceful efforts to enhance access to knowledge and to communicate effectively our research results. Economists have received Nobel prizes for "proving" things that sociology has long established, such as the fact that no actors have perfect access to information (Joseph Stiglitz) and that hunger is a function of politics and not production capacity (Amartya Sen).<sup>2</sup> We can complain that those in power don't listen to critical social scientists, but what are we *doing* to try to find new ways to communicate sociological research to broader audiences? We should work harder to provide information that is relevant to public deliberation about policy, and we must ask continually how

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<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to my colleague, Timothy P. Moran, for sharing this observation.

our work might be shaped by, as well as how it contributes to, existing conflicts over power and resources.

As educators, we play important roles to strengthen the public sphere by cultivating interest in the social world and by helping strengthen the knowledge and skills people have for being active and critical citizens. We must be more self-conscious about this role and more active in helping to promote life-long learning in our communities. From our campuses we can work to both expand the audience we reach, and we can also find ways to reinforce through the material we teach ideas about global solidarity and pluralism. By engaging our students in discussions about the benefits and challenges of pluralism and the ways different societies have managed differences among diverse groups, we can help foster the kind of culture required for a more democratic world order.<sup>3</sup>

As a scholar of social movements I am sometimes challenged (usually when I venture outside of sociological and movement circles) for being “biased” because my analyses explicitly aim to strengthen movements I study. The unspoken assumption of those challenging my scholarly integrity is that their own work is unbiased. But what is often the case is that their work does not challenge predominant assumptions about power, and therefore its potential bias is not questioned. Given the unprecedented inequities of the global system and the complex ways that power relations are reproduced, it is vital that sociologists take sides in an effort to alter the balance of power in favor of civil society. But that does not mean that we align ourselves uncritically with particular agents of change.

In case it needs restating, we must debunk the myth of social science objectivity. Analysts must recognize their own role within existing power relations and make explicit the values and preferences that guide their own research agendas. When these values are acknowledged, both the researcher and her readers can better evaluate how these preferences may have influenced the analysis or conclusions of the study. Social scientists cannot remove themselves from the world, and we should not pretend that our research methods provide us with untainted and somehow comprehensive understandings of complex social reality. We are shaped by our cultures, by our own national political systems, and by the discourses and information available in the social contexts in which we live and work. Our disciplines can operate much like religious belief systems, and we accept certain ideas about what evidence and research methods are acceptable mainly on faith rather than on a serious effort to critically analyze the merits and limitations of different approaches. In short, the social contexts in which we operate strongly influence both the choices we make about what to investigate and how we do so. If we fail to appreciate how these contexts shape our analyses, our research will have limited potential for helping improve the human condition.

While always striving for intellectual rigor in our work, social scientists *should* have a personal concern for the issues they research. How, for instance, can we continue to study rising inequality without wanting to know more about what causes it or how it can be remedied? Similarly, how can we study the causes of wars without wanting to find ways to use that knowledge to prevent future wars? Social science cannot prevent values or preferences from shaping our choices of research questions, but it does provide guidance that can limit the potential for bias.

A growing number of activists have extensive training in social science, and more scholars are seeking ways to form relationships with movements that allow them to maintain their professional identities while bringing particular resources into the movement. For instance, the 2005 meeting of the World Social Forum generated more than 40 proposals for workshops

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<sup>3</sup> The *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World* can be a useful resource for this kind of discussion. [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org).

focusing on relationships between universities and social change advocates, and Sociologists Without Borders is participating in the process of dialogue and coordination among these groups. While I don't have an answer to the question of what is the proper relationship between scholars and movements, I do know that broad, international dialogue is needed in order to articulate such a relationship in the complex and global system.

Sociologists and other analysts concerned with justice and equity should be up front about the need to understand how those with power keep it and how those without power might be given a stake in the system. To do this we also need to scrutinize another disciplinary norm. Our methodological preference for analyzing "what is" or "what was" steers us away from questions about what could be. We lack a strong tradition of using our social scientific skills to explore the "sociology of the nonexistent" (see, e.g., de Sousa Santos 2004; Korzeniewicz and Smith 2000: 27). If, as the spirit of Porto Alegre suggests, "another world is possible," what can sociology tell us about what such a world might look like and how we might get there?

During last August's ASA meeting in San Francisco, many observed that our profession's incentive structures discourage critical and engaged sociological work. We must work to identify how both our discipline and higher education systems generally constrain possibilities for doing socially and politically relevant work. And we must find ways to transform these arrangements so that we can nurture possibilities for public sociology. This struggle will take us well beyond the classroom and the ASA, but it is crucial to the survival of both our profession and of democracy.

### *Acting for Change*

If our analysis of the contemporary global situation leads us to conclude that there is an urgent need for major social transformation, then how can we as individuals and as sociologists be part of a broader process of change? How can we promote "decommodification," which Wallerstein rightly regards as an important step to a better world? Along with Peter Waterman and Jill Timms, I think the more effective approach for critical theorists and for international labor is to emphasize the empowerment of civil society over the abolition or transformation of capitalism, or global society over world system. While the two complement each other, too often the struggle against capital has alienated key allies and disempowered those it has sought to liberate. We need a new approach, and the contemporary movement for global justice provides opportunities and ideas in this regard.

Walden Bello, a sociologist at the University of the Philippines and a major figure in the movement for global justice, offers some of the most insightful and clear discussion of how this might be done (2003). The key failures of the contemporary global economy, according to Bello, are its subordination of society to markets and its failure to tolerate and profit from diversity. Following Polanyi, he calls for efforts to re-embed economy in society so that the values of security, equity, and social solidarity take precedence over profit maximization. Drawing from vast experience in social movements and from his own careful and expansive analyses, he has a two-pronged proposal for helping advance this agenda, which he labels "deglobalization."

"Deglobalization" reflects much of what the "spirit of Porto Alegre" is about. It is not about withdrawing from the international economy, but rather it celebrates global ties while seeking to expand the freedom and choice local communities have about how they will organize their economic lives. In other words, it fosters global solidarity and pluralism. But such a re-orientation cannot happen within the current system of economic totalitarianism, which denies alternative economic models the resources and protection they need to survive. Thus, Bello argues that we need simultaneous efforts to *deconstruct* the existing institutions that support corporate globalization and to *reconstruct* new ways of organizing economic life around the core organizing principle of tolerance of diversity.

The global economy is a force that centralizes and homogenizes. It must constantly expand in order to survive. Deconstructing this system will obviously be an immense struggle, but as the work of Wallerstein and others shows, it stands on shaky foundations. Bello argues that by continuing to disrupt meetings of the global financial institutions and by increasing direct action aimed at obstructing the operations of major corporations and governments that advance the corporate globalization agenda --particularly those companies tied to the Iraq occupation and to the broader Middle East conflict-- social movements can affect two of the major cleavages Wallerstein identifies (among competitors in the core and between the North and South) and help roll back the global capitalist order and open up spaces for alternatives.

To strengthen civil societies, Bello calls for what is essentially the democratization of the global economy. "Deglobalization" involves:

- \*Reducing dependence on foreign investment and foreign financial markets by increasing reliance on locally available resources wherever possible;
- \*Redistributing income and land to create the financial resources for investment;
- \*De-emphasizing growth and maximizing equity in economic policy;
- \*Abandoning market governance in favor of more democratic forms of economic decision making;
- \*Subjecting the private sector and the state to constant monitoring by civil society;
- \*Reorienting production to favor a diverse mix of local and national producers over remote ones;
- \*Encouraging subsidiarity in our economies so that the production of goods takes place at the community and national level wherever possible. (2003:113-4).

Deglobalization would redistribute economic power and thereby make economic decision making more inclusive, diverse, and responsive to local needs.

Deglobalization encourages activities that many activists around the world are already doing and that are celebrated in spaces like the World Social Forum and its regional and local counterparts. Economic direct action schemes can help create more participatory economies, where people become more conscious of their roles as economic actors. Instead of allowing global markets and actors determine what kinds of economic development will take place in a region or locale, citizens combine their efforts to define their own economic options. The aim is to encourage people to think about the economy in ways that empower them rather than perpetuate dependence on corporations and remote sources of finance. Some examples include, for instance, community supported agriculture (CSAs), local currencies, fair trade, DIY ("do it yourself") and voluntary simplicity, and "culture jamming" to challenge the ideology of consumerism. By working to advance these and other alternatives, social movements (and the sociologists who work with them) contribute to local empowerment and pluralism in the world economy. Sociologists can play a particular role in helping foster global solidarity by helping people understand how such local initiatives are related to a broader, global movement. Without such solidarity, local initiatives can become insular and defensive rather than inclusive and mutually supportive.

Deglobalization is not "anti-globalization." Instead, it requires a global order (solidarity) that encourages and protects diversity and pluralism. Is there hope for such a system? Not without prior efforts to deconstruct the existing, oligarchic order. But there are signs of hope in two recent United Nations reports. The High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change stressed the need to make the UN more representative by making the Security Council more inclusive and by subjecting its decisions to more rigorous scrutiny by the international community. Although we might have wished for more far-reaching proposals, the report provides an opportunity to press demands for greater pluralism and accountability in the global

polity. The second report, by the Eminent Persons Panel on UN-Civil Society relations (headed by a sociologist and former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso), provides even more support for those advocating for more representative and inclusive international institutions. That report adopts some fundamentally different ideas about governance, calling on the UN to help facilitate more equitable participation in international affairs by both civil society actors and national legislators.<sup>4</sup>

If some of the latter panel's proposals are taken up (and they only will be if there is widespread popular mobilization to encourage this), this would make for a far more inclusive, representative, and responsive UN than we now have. It would also decrease the likelihood of future unilateralist actions like the U.S. invasion of Iraq. But we need more intellectual leadership to enhance public discourse about multilateralism and to debunk the campaigns by the right-wing media and leadership in the U.S. to demonize global institutions. Efforts by social scientists are crucial here to help encourage more global awareness among the U.S. public and to demonstrate the connections between the values and ideals of democracy and the multilateral practice of democracy in the broader world community.

Sociologists can play important roles in supporting civil society at local, national, and global levels. We can help nurture critical perspectives on power while helping articulate new understandings of human identities in an increasingly interconnected world. We need to be self-conscious about our role in helping people view themselves as part of a wider, international community. We also need to be part of an effort to foster appreciation for and tolerance of diversity. By supporting initiatives to expand participation in local and national economies, and by encouraging more inclusive and accountable multilateral institutions, sociologists can help advance a world where the economy is a means and not an end of social life.

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<sup>4</sup> The report, along with civil society groups' responses and critiques of it, can be found at <http://www.un-ngls.org/UNreform.htm>.